

“DOING POETRY” BY PROTOCOL

Peter Gow, 2002

I have been teaching poetry this year by using a modified version of the Collaborative Assessment Center protocol, which was developed to help teachers look carefully at student work. The structure of the protocol, however, is ideally suited to helping students look at and analyze short texts, including poetry. Best of all, the methodology allows the teacher to take on the role of a wise facilitator as the students take ownership of all the analytical work

As designed for looking at student work, the CAC protocol begins by identifying what is clear and apparent in a text. Although it is not in the “standard” CAC protocol, Steve Seidel of Project Zero interposes a new stage here, which is to identify elements in the work that have emotional resonance for the audience. The next stage is to develop questions based on the work, followed by speculation as to “what the student is working on” in the piece. The final stages involve a response from the presenting teacher and then reflection the process itself.

With the plan of using a full class period to discuss a poem, I begin the discussion by passing out a copy of the poem (although I might have asked to students to read a longer poem as homework). Since one of my variations from the protocol is to make a “public” record of the group’s responses at each stage, while the students are reading I divide the classroom board into four sections, representing my modification of the protocol:

| I. What is here? What do we know? | II. What emotional qualities or issues are here? | III. What questions do we have about this work? | IV. What are the implications here for us as human beings? |
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Discussion begins with Section I. The skill being developed here is close and accurate reading of the text. Any fact that can be supported by evidence from the text is acceptable, and certain details are absolutely necessary—title, author, length, structure, rhythmic structure, rhyme scheme, punctuation style, use of capitalization, figures of speech—even word count. I expect that each student will have some contribution to make to the list, and I expect that any contribution will reflect the text. As facilitator, I reject any interpretation here, although I may ask a student to rephrase a comment as a question or comment for placement in another category—but I want to focus on this section alone, if possible.

As facilitator, I reserve the right to paraphrase or abbreviate contributions as I put them on the board, and I also make a point of “saying it back” to the student when I write, just to make sure that everyone is hearing and understanding the same thing.

Section II asks students to consider the emotional content and effect of the text. As facilitator, I do insist that students justify each contribution here with a reference to the language or content of the poem, but I accept any. At this stage, students are likely to comment on the effect of figures of speech and point of view and to identify the tone of the text. This stage combines thoughtful reading with an increasingly deep engagement. Here again, student discussion arises spontaneously in response to suggestions made by students or to my restatement of the comment.

We then move on to Section III. Here the students can be a bit more interpretive, and the questions they pose are often quite provocative (although they are also sometimes banal in the extreme). Again, I stick to my role as facilitator. I accept any question that seems to reflect engagement with the text; others I push back to the students, who are usually pretty savvy about helping each other clarify or sharpen their questions. The point of this section is to have students interact with the text in an active way.

I am willing, at this stage, to offer some factual or corrective information if, for example, a student poses a question that can be answered easily (“Did Frost pick apples for a living?”), but I am likely to ask the student to explain why such a question is important.

At last, in accepting contributions for Section IV, I invite broader interpretations of what is going on in the poem—the poet’s overall intent, allegorical possibilities, deeper philosophical meanings. I insist on evidence from the text to support each contribution, but I accept anything that can be justified. Here the discussion really takes off, as a student’s contributions have to be justified not only to me, but to the jury of her or his peers, which can be pretty persnickety. In a last portion of discussion, I also take a page from one of Steve Seidel’s variations on the CAC protocol to raise the one question I’m not sure anyone ever asked me as a high school student analyzing poetry: *What are the implications in this poem for us as human beings?* To me, this question strikes at the heart of why poetry is and why we read it. Too often students are asked to study poetry as though the poet had written the poem to be dismantled by sophomores searching for “the one right answer.” This question steers the discussion in a much more fruitful direction.

Even so, depending on the poem and on the progress made, I may end the discussion with a brief review of “the official version”—for example, that “‘After Apple-Picking’ is usually interpreted as an extended allegory about a dying person taking stock of her or his life.” In most cases, however, the class has made it to this point—and well beyond—without my help.

I believe that we all intend as English teachers to avoid the “one right answer” or “party line” approach to literary interpretation, and this protocol, although it forces close reading and close analysis, remains satisfyingly open-ended. Discussion, too, remains open-ended, although with

careful facilitation, the students' own engagement with the text keep them very much on task and digging, effecting in the end a happy victory of depth over breadth.